



# THREE SIDES TO ESC

In the final part of our series, **Ken Nowack** and **Andrew Munro** look at the upside, downside and dark side of emotional and social competence →

**A** quick Google search on the topic of “emotional intelligence” leads to approximately 185 million results. Numerous books, articles and conferences have been devoted exclusively to the expanding topic of emotional and social competence (ESC) and it is one of the most extensively studied constructs in both psychology and management.

Judging by much of the media debate, ESC is a magical elixir that explains and predicts pretty much everything – from individual happiness, team effectiveness and leadership success, to organisational engagement, productivity and innovation. In his 1996 book *Emotional Intelligence*, author and psychologist Daniel Goleman even went so far as suggesting that emotional intelligence might actually be more important than general mental ability (not true).



## ***Individuals high in ESC are able to regulate their emotions to remain optimistic and manage negative feelings in the workplace***

After over two decades of applying ESC, it is curious then that global surveys still indicate significant challenge in building and maintaining high levels of psychological safety and organisational trust. It could be we haven't drunk enough of the elixir. Alternatively, is it possible that organisations drank too much?

In reality, ESC is complex in the way it is both conceptualised and measured. Despite its almost universal appeal and positive press, there might actually be a downside and a “dark side” to this multi-faceted concept and its impact on both work and non-work outcomes.

### **The upside of ESC**

Across a large literature, consistently positive associations have been found between ESC and a range of individual and organisational outcomes such as job satisfaction, wellbeing, job performance, organisational citizenship behaviours, leadership, organisational commitment and health.

Individuals high in ESC are able to regulate their emotions to remain optimistic and manage negative feelings

in the workplace, with the consequence of higher job satisfaction/commitment, and lower counterproductive work behaviours and turnover intentions.

Based on prevailing ESC definitions in the literature, it can be assumed that high-ESC individuals would be, on average, more effective in social interactions than their low-ESC peers. Current research with ability measures (such as MSCEIT<sup>1</sup>; Geneva Emotional Competence Test<sup>2</sup>) and trait measures (EQ-i 2.0<sup>3</sup>) consistently demonstrate positive associations with healthy personal and social functioning, and to academic or professional success in different contexts.

Given that the latest studies on personality and mixed/behavioural measures of ESC suggest they contain a variety of “active ingredients” (such as conscientiousness, extroversion, emotional stability, self-efficacy, self-rated

performance, cognitive ability) it is not surprising to find that employees with higher levels should enable success in a variety of work-related outcomes.

Several recent reviews of the ESC literature also reach a conclusion that individual and team interventions designed to enhance ESC are successful – particularly benefiting psychological health and wellbeing. Overall, these findings confirm the importance of ESC with a myriad of individual and organisational outcomes, and provide support for existing coaching and training programmes in this area.

### **The downside of ESC**

As popular as the claims about the importance of ESC to job, career and personal success are, there are some important limitations and caveats. ESC may not be an unconditional good. Research<sup>4</sup> by Nikos Bozionelos and his colleagues at the EM Lyon Business School has found that most ESC facets actually relate with job performance in a non-linear manner (U-shaped curve). That is, those who score highest and lowest on ESC appear to perform less well against

objective measures of job performance than those with moderate scores.

How might someone who lacks ESC possibly be more successful in work and life? For example, low ESC individuals – through the ability to focus and engage in tasks without interruption – achieve better performance compared to their counterparts who possess average levels of these abilities. In fact, individuals with low emotional and impulse control might actually make much faster decisions and bring increased creative thinking.

Additionally, lack of ESC abilities such as empathy, social awareness, emotional perception and control might also enable individuals to be less concerned by the views of their colleagues and peers. These individuals provide the kind of constructive challenge that tackles comfortable interpersonal harmony, and also help avoid damaging group-think.

Therefore, ESC training may be slightly beneficial to employees with average ESC scores but detrimental to those lacking the ability to perceive and manage their own emotions/behaviours and those of others.

Context, of course, is critical and the relevance of training will also depend on organisational culture and team dynamics as well as the specifics of the role. Task and emergency response teams might benefit from a singular task focus where prompt actions and decisions are required, and extremely emotional perception of other team members might actually interfere with high performance. If members of these teams demonstrate low emotional awareness, it might not be recommended to raise their skills and abilities given their primary job roles and responsibilities.

In fact, a summary<sup>5</sup> of 171 studies on emotional intelligence by Dana Joseph and Daniel Newman (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the US) found that for those dealing with high “emotional labour” jobs (jobs that require positive emotional displays), all types of ESC measures exhibited meaningful contributions to job performance. However, for low emotional labour jobs, ESC didn't predict job success and in many cases performance actually declined.

Anita Williams Woolley (Carnegie Mellon) and her colleagues conducted other studies<sup>6</sup> to see whether “collective emotional intelligence” in teams exists. Overall, they found that individual brain

power contributed very little to the actual performance of the teams. It seems intuitive that group cohesion, satisfaction with the team and engagement would be pretty important for collective intelligence. However, none of these were significant predictors of high performance. Three important findings emerged regarding team emotional intelligence that gained great traction in the business world:

- ▶ Group intelligence was significantly correlated with the average social sensitivity of group members measured by a common social and emotional intelligence face recognition test (Reading of the Mind in the Eyes<sup>7</sup>).
- ▶ Group intelligence was inversely correlated with having dominant group members who spoke a lot – smarter groups had more equal distribution of conversational turn-taking.

is easy to “drink the ESC elixir” just because a well-known company has rolled out a particular programme or a thought leader is publicising their new book at a conference.

### The “dark side” of ESC

Could the skills and ability of some employees blessed with being able to read verbal and non-verbal cues of others and rapidly engender trust be used for non-benevolent ends? Could possessing strong ESC skills and abilities have a manipulative “dark side”, leading some employees to fabricate favourable impressions of themselves, cleverly deceive others or purposely manipulate and influence others for their own personal gain?

In psychology, the “dark triad” of machiavellianism, narcissism and

counterproductive behaviour on the job, and those possessing high ESC could strategically use their emotional skills to manipulate others to get what they want in relationships – expressing these dark side tendencies.

### Conclusion

Despite the wide popularity of the many facets of emotional and social competence, practitioners should also be aware of the potential downsides and dark sides to perceiving, understanding and regulating our own emotions and the emotions of others.

In general, possessing ESC confers general advantages to health, work and life success.

In general, it appears to be a constellation of emotions, traits and abilities that can be directly

### Research relationship between ESC and the dark triad

Machiavellianism (Common attributes include deception, being unprincipled and/or amoral, exploitive of others and manipulative)	ESC is negatively related to machiavellianism
Narcissism (Common attributes include egotistic, grandiose, entitled and superior in thought compared to others)	ESC is unrelated to narcissism
Psychopathology (Common attributes include lack of guilt and remorse in harming others, antisocial, dominant and impulsive/thrill seeking)	ESC is negatively related to psychopathology

- ▶ Team intelligence was significantly associated with the number of women in the group, but the finding in this study suggested it was mediated by social sensitivity (women scored as a group higher on this than their male team members).

However, the excitement around collective intelligence was recently largely refuted by a reanalysis<sup>8</sup> of Woolley’s data by Marcus Credé, a researcher at Iowa State University. He re-examined the data from six previously published samples and showed that, despite the immense media and academic attention to these findings, there was actually insufficient support for the existence of this popular team ESC concept.

It’s a good illustration of why replication of ESC research is so important and how those “research has found ...” claims need cool-headed analysis. It

psychopathology defines three personality patterns that indicate self-serving tendencies. These traits are strongly associated with counterproductive work behaviours and poor job performance.

Two current independent reviews<sup>9</sup> of the literature by Chao Miao (Purdue School of Business) and colleagues, and Sarah Davis (University of Worcester) have concluded that ESC is associated with two of the dark triad traits (machiavellianism and psychopathology) but isn’t consistently related to the narcissism (see table, above, on the research relationship between ESC and the dark triad).

These findings suggest that employees high in ESC are least likely to be high on two of the three undesirable personality traits. And employees who show low ESC are least likely to demonstrate empathy and prosocial concern for others. Indeed, some people who are lacking in ESC might contribute to



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influenced by coaching, training and other interventions (such as mindfulness meditation). In both work and life, it appears that it is not how smart you are that matters, but how you are smart. **TJ**

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### References

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